

Organizing Voter-Turnout Campaigns

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OBJECTIVES

A successful voter-turnout campaign will help students and (in some cases) community members to:

1. increase awareness of voter-registration deadlines.
2. explore the link between voting and changes in government/policies.¹
3. examine the foundations of the American political system.
4. promote cooperation between schools and the community.
5. develop interpersonal skills.
6. develop creative thinking skills and the ability to be part of a team.
7. increase voter turnout on election day.²
8. develop problem solving skills.

METHODS

A successful voter turnout campaign consists of the following phases:

1. Research historical incidents where one vote has made a significant difference.
2. Analyze voting trends and causes.
3. Plan and organize the campaign.

1. For the new National Standards for Civics and Government's suggestions regarding the role of organized groups in political life, see the new standards, Section II. See also the new standards' suggestions about forming and carrying out public policy in Section V Letter F (pages 38–39) for K–4 Standards, Section III Letter F (pages 68–69) for grades 5–8 Standards, and Letter E (pages 117–120) for grades 9–12 Standards.

2. Among the many relevant topics of the new standards, voter turnout/registration campaigns can help students understand the need for political leadership and public service. See the new standards, Section V.

1. Research historical incidents where one vote has made a significant difference.

- ★ One vote made Oliver Cromwell Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England in 1645.
- ★ One vote caused Charles I to be executed in 1649.
- ★ One vote elected Thomas Jefferson president in 1800.
- ★ One vote made Texas part of the U.S. in 1845.
- ★ One vote saved President Andrew Johnson from impeachment in 1868.
- ★ One vote changed France from a monarchy to a Republic in 1875.
- ★ An average of only one vote per precinct passed women's suffrage in California in 1911.
- ★ Less than one vote per precinct, in one state, elected Woodrow Wilson President in 1912.
- ★ One vote made Tennessee the 36th state to ratify the 19th amendment, which gave women the right to vote in 1920.
- ★ One vote made Adolph Hitler head of the Nazi party in 1923.
- ★ A change of one vote per precinct in three states in 1968 would have made Hubert Humphrey president instead of Richard Nixon.

2. Analyze voting trends and their causes.

Questions such as these can serve as a springboard for discussion:

- ★ What are the responsibilities and rights of a voting citizen? How are these guaranteed and protected? (For example, what were the implications of the Voting Rights Act? What events led up to the Voting Rights Act legislation? What role did the Civil Rights Movement play in this legislation?)
- ★ When did African Americans earn the right to vote? (Constitutional Amendment XV) women? (Constitutional Amendment XIX) How did these amendments change government/politics at the time? Did more African Americans/women enter into political office? Why or why not?
- ★ What has caused the current decline in voter turnout? What are/will be the implications of this trend?
- ★ How has voter apathy affected other countries (for example, the Weimar Republic)?
- ★ Is voter participation increasing or decreasing in your state/district/area and why? To what else might these trends be connected (economic, educational, weather)?
- ★ What efforts have been made to increase voter turnout in your state/district/area? (*See Figure H.*)
- ★ How successful was Oregon's vote-by-mail project and why? Could it be successfully implemented in other states?
- ★ Organize student-run drives to register voters and/or get voters to the polls. Design events such as contests, parades, transportation, and telephone chains, or publish a special neighborhood paper about the need to vote or about the candidates and issues.

In 1993, Congress passed the National Voter Registration Act, also called the "motor voter law." This law stipulates that citizens be given the opportunity to register to vote:

- ★ when they apply for, renew, or change the address on their driver's licenses or non-driver ID cards.
- ★ at federally designated government agencies and military offices and other facilities designated by the state (libraries, schools, and clerk's offices).

Has your state implemented the motor voter registration law? Why or why not? What are the projected outcomes of this initiative? Why has this initiative been controversial? Three months after the National Voter Registration Act became law, two million Americans registered to vote in the 32 states that implemented the law. Government officials estimate that 18 million more Americans will register to vote before the '96 elections. How do you believe this will affect the outcome of the upcoming elections?

Figure H

3. Plan and organize a voter turnout.³

The following steps can help you organize a successful voter turnout campaign:

- ★ List your goals.
- ★ Inventory your resources.
- ★ Schedule a location and date.
- ★ Determine the format of your event.
- ★ Delegate responsibilities. ? Involve parents and the community.
- ★ Publicize your event.
- ★ Follow up.

3. A Note of Caution: Registering new voters can be a political lightning rod if one does not take certain precautions. If you're planning and organizing a voter turnout campaign, protect your credibility. Obtain your administrator's approval at as many levels as necessary. Work with organizations whose reputation for nonpartisanship is unquestioned, such as the League of Women Voters or county election officials. Seek the endorsement of local representatives from both major national parties. Once you have a well-grounded plan, move forward fearlessly.

A. LIST YOUR GOALS.

With your students, decide if you want to register voters or get voters to the polls. Who is your target audience? Consider targeting one segment of the voting population such as women, ethnic groups, and seniors. Targeting under-represented populations can be a very efficient use of resources, as well as a highly effective and broadly applicable teaching tool. The U.S. Census Bureau or your state and/or local election officials can provide you with voter statistics for your district.

B. INVENTORY YOUR RESOURCES.

Spend a class period brainstorming the necessary and available resources. Do you have access to: money, office supplies, copying equipment, word processing machines, faxes and phones, video cameras, meeting rooms, tables, chairs, podiums, lecterns, refreshments, and so on? What do you need that you don't already have?

If your effort is going to include a voter registration drive, you'll need very specific resources, such as official forms. It may help to make a checklist of all the resources you'll need before you begin your effort (*see Figure I*).

Students can provide tremendous resources, both in terms of staffing and researching or coordinating tasks. Encourage parents to get involved; perhaps they have a personal contact at the local TV station who can help you get media coverage of your event, or they may have training in organizing community events. Does your community have local chapters of the Young Democrats or Young Republicans? Your most important resource is your local Board of Elections. Be sure you contact them early and work with them closely.

C. SCHEDULE A LOCATION AND DATE.

When and where do you want your event to take place? Planning voter drives around other civic events can help you increase the number of people you reach. Consider choosing a central location or location near your target audience. For example, you could set up voter-registration booths for women at local grocery stores or outside a meeting of local business women; at college football games or concerts for young people; and at nursing homes for seniors.

CHECKLIST FOR REGISTRATION SUPPLIES

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Identifying sign or poster | <input type="checkbox"/> Stamps (if necessary to mail forms) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Name tags for registrars | <input type="checkbox"/> Phone numbers of registration offices in adjacent jurisdictions |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Pens, pencils | <input type="checkbox"/> Official Forms |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Forms for recording names and addresses of registrants | <input type="checkbox"/> Registration form |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Information on absentee voting | <input type="checkbox"/> Change-of-address form |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Polling place list | <input type="checkbox"/> Change-of-name form |
| <input type="checkbox"/> List of other registration sites and schedules | <input type="checkbox"/> Change-of-party form (if there is and schedules party registration) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Street directory | <input type="checkbox"/> Registration forms for neighboring jurisdictions (if permissible) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Directions to elections office | <input type="checkbox"/> Applications for absentee ballots |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Change for telephone (to call elections office with queries) | |

Make sure registrars are familiar with all the necessary forms. If the jurisdiction is covered under the language requirements of the Voting Rights Act,* registration applications, signs, and all other materials must be printed in both English and the specified minority language.

* Jurisdictions in which (a) more than 5 percent of the voting age population are members of a single-language minority group—Native American, Asian American, Alaskan native, Spanish heritage—and the group's illiteracy rate is higher than the national illiteracy rate, or (b) a single language minority group comprises more than 5 percent of the population. The 1972 presidential election was conducted in English and the total voter registration turnout for that election was less than 50 percent.

Checklist reprinted from "Getting out the Vote—A Guide for Running Registration and Voting Drives," 1984 League of Women Voters Education Fund.

Figure 1

D. DETERMINE THE FORMAT OF YOUR EVENT.

Consider the following possible formats:

- ★ **Organize a student contest to design a get-out-the-vote flyer.** To ensure adequate participation, prizes should be awarded on a first-, second- and third-place basis. The flyer winning first place could be duplicated and distributed throughout the neighborhood.
- ★ **Design political posters using headlines and pictures from newspaper and magazine articles.** For instance, one poster could be constructed displaying favorable headlines and photos of a particular candidate. Another poster could be constructed displaying unfavorable headlines and photos of that same candidate. This concept could be applied to other candidates as well as to each key issue. These posters might be used during a classroom debate, entered into a contest, displayed at a get-out-the-vote parade, posted on an informational school bulletin board, or displayed in local shop windows. If entered into a contest, the winners might have their designs posted throughout the community or receive gift certificates from local businesses.
- ★ **Organize a parade, complete with marching bands.** Invite spectators along the parade route to join the march for voter registration (which might end at a bank of registration booths). The parade could be led by a public official with a loudspeaker (perhaps the superintendent, the mayor, or even your congressperson). One school could be designated for the beginning of the parade and a different school, community center, church or library as the end. The designated end should be equipped with personnel, tables, pens, papers, and registration forms needed to register new voters. A school bus could be designated to accompany the parade participants in order to transport spectators who are unable to join in the march to the registration area. (You'll want to check with local officials to find out if you need a permit to hold such an event.)
- ★ **Organize a neighborhood walk to turn out the vote.** A small group of students, led by an adult advisor, could ring door bells and enlist their neighbors to register and go to the polls. A signed "contract" is most likely to produce results! A variation on the walk is a Halloween trick-or-treat turnabout. Students dressed in patriotic costumes request not candy, but a promise to vote.
- ★ **Publish a school or community newsletter.** Recruit student reporters, interviewers, photographers, and editors to create a newsletter that focuses on current election issues, candidates, and propositions which may directly affect the community. Students could interview neighborhood business owners and residents regarding the issues. Opinions published may be anonymous if desired. Students might also integrate information about the mock election into the newsletter, inviting the parents and community members to mock election activities to help them become better informed about the candidates and issues.
- ★ **Prepare a brochure or handbook with basic information about voter registration for distribution to the community.** Contact your local League of Women Voters and your County Clerk or other local election officials to be sure your information is accurate and up to date! (See *Figure 7* for a current sample.)
- ★ **Coordinate a telephone chain to register voters or get voters to the polls.** Students might telephone the parents of five schoolmates to provide them with voter registration requirements or voting information. Important information to convey includes: the date, location, and hours of the closest registration site; the requirements for registration; and information about how to get to and from the polls (public transportation, school bus shuttles, car pools, teen volunteers). Prior to Election Day students must also know where and when registered voters can vote, and what the documents voters need to take with them to vote. In order to

BASIC INFORMATION FOR A REGISTRATION BROCHURE ³	
WHO CAN REGISTER	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. Citizens, 18 years old and above (except, in most states, convicted felons and those adjudged mentally incompetent) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Residents of the jurisdiction (Include information if your state law permits 17-year-olds to register if they will be 18 by election day.)
WHERE TO REGISTER	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Board of Elections address and phone number; include 24-hour message number, if office has one. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Decentralized sites, with addresses and phone numbers Mobile units, if any, with schedules
WHAT IDENTIFICATION IS REQUIRED?	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Birth certificate? Proof of naturalization? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Driver's license? Other?
WHEN TO REGISTER	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hours Days of the week 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Registration deadline
WHEN TO REREGISTER OR NOTIFY ELECTIONS OFFICE OF CHANGES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After a name change or an address change (notification of change may be required, even if reregistration is not). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> After a name is removed from the list
HOW TO REGISTER BY MAIL (IF POSSIBLE IN YOUR STATE)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where forms are available Where to send them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Phone numbers to call to request forms, including your organization's, if permitted.

Figure J

Note:

Include your logo and motivational message as well as your office phone number, address, and hours. Consider whether you might have a single brochure that includes information on both registration and voting. This basic information may be already prepared and available from your local election office. Ask before you print your own.

3. "Basic Information for a Registration Brochure" reprinted from "Getting out the Vote—A Guide for Running Registration and Voting Drives," 1984 League of Women Voters Education Fund.

continue the chain, the student must be prepared to provide each contact with the name and telephone number of three additional telephone contacts. Students then ask each of their five contacts to telephone three additional contacts to help get the word out.

- ★ Provide transportation to voter registration sites or to the polls. Voter registration tables might be set up outside designated voter registration sites (churches, supermarkets, community centers, libraries, City Hall). Buses might transport students and registrants or take voters to the polls. One teacher rented a school bus to take her school's eligible voters to the polls to cast their first vote! The students carried an American flag into each polling place to celebrate their first votes and gave each other high-fives when they came out as voters. *Seventeen* magazine ran their photo.

Use the media, school newsletters, and other formats to inform those registering or voting of the hours the bus is available, where it can be boarded, its destination, and the approximate time they will return to the boarding site. Tables and chairs could be set up outside the bus while people wait to register. Students might offer to baby-sit the children of those who are registering or voting, stay with the ill or elderly while a caretaker goes out to vote, or exchange a chore (e.g., mowing the lawn) for time spent going to the polls. Try brainstorming how student time can be exchanged for time to register and vote.

- ★ Other format suggestions: One group in Tennessee organized a "Neighborhood Reunion" of local success stories. Doctors, lawyers, business people, and other professionals who once lived in a low-income neighborhood "came home" to meet the children now struggling to grow up there.

The event inspired voter turn-out campaigns to support the candidates who would help find funds for neighborhood improvement. The students' efforts resulted in the reopening of the local library and neighborhood pool.

In Mississippi, former Secretary of State Dick Molpus gave mock election participants a blank registration form and challenged them to each register one voter for future elections. Other schools have organized districtwide competitions to see which school could register the most voters.

Schedule a classroom visit with a local election official who can give you other ideas and suggestions for events and guidance in planning, registration, and voting requirements.

As students compile a list of event possibilities, suggest that they research their ideas (using the library, election officials, community contacts and/or business leaders) to make an educated decision and a well thought-out plan for the event.

If need be, clear your project, plans and/or registration sites with your school district and with relevant facilities or organizations. (Do you need a special permit to locate voter registration booths on city sidewalks? Do local ordinances regulate distribution of flyers on street corners?)

E. DELEGATE RESPONSIBILITIES.

Once the event or activity has been selected, assign teams of students to various tasks and responsibilities. For example, students can research voter statistics and registration laws (which differ from state to state). They may also volunteer to develop collateral materials or flyers. You may want to consider assigning each student team a different task, such as:

- ★ **manning voter registration booths.** Team members could organize a schedule and recruit volunteers. If possible, they could also coordinate student transportation to and from their locations. Note: "Getting Out the Vote, A Guide for Running Registration and Voting Drives" by the League of Women Voters Education Fund points out that "in jurisdictions that do not permit volunteer deputy registrars, local election officials are truly key, because you will need paid registrars to do the actual registering."

- ★ **researching candidates/campaign issues.** Consider assigning one team to each of the local, state, or federal candidates to research his or her positions on high-profile election issues (such as health care, taxes, immigration) as well as their proposals to solve these issues.
- ★ **organizing refreshments.** Several students might coordinate volunteers (home economics teachers and/or students, parents) to provide refreshments, make refreshments themselves, or ask local restaurants or grocery stores to provide refreshments.
- ★ **drafting canvassing scripts for a door-to-door voter registration campaign.** Team members might use preproduced scripts or research similar scripts, consult the League of Women Voters or local elections officials, and draft their own.

Have students make regular class presentations about their findings, efforts, and/or progress.

F. INVOLVE PARENTS AND THE COMMUNITY.

At a minimum, involve parents in discussions with students at home. Note that the University of Colorado's formal evaluation of the 1992 National Student/Parent Mock Election found that participating students showed increases in the discussion of political and election topics with parents. In addition to discussions of candidates and issues, help students to discuss the importance of voting with their parents, and perhaps persuade parents who are "too busy" of the difference their one vote can make. Try role-playing such discussions in class, then discussing the results of students' efforts once they have tried their powers of persuasion on their family.

Consult your list of needs and, if possible, ask parents as well as students to help fulfill them. Community members, local organizations, and business can often provide resources and guidance. Suggest that students draft letters to community members (perhaps each student is assigned one business, organization, or election official) asking for their help in organizing the event, getting the word out, or providing resources. Some suggestions follow:

- ★ Local election officials may provide a facility or guidance in planning your event as well as impartial information.
- ★ Owners or managers of local businesses might donate resources or services to print event flyers (or simply display the flyers); man registration booths; allow use of their parking lots for voter registration; provide prizes for contests, posters, parade costumes, free advertising; or help with building parade floats.
- ★ Members of local organizations, such as 4-H groups, the PTA, and fraternal orders can help judge poster contests and provide refreshments.
- ★ Local candidates can speak at the end of parade routes, at centrally located registration events.
- ★ Members of the League of Women Voters, a National Student/Parent Mock Election national cooperating organization, may be able to offer event planning guidance and advice as a result of their own get-out-the-vote drives.
- ★ Parents may volunteer during the event or event preparation to shuttle students to and from registration booths, provide refreshments, participate in a neighborhood canvassing campaign, or man voter registration booths.

Reach out to everyone, even those who may have only nominal interest in the project. (See Chapter 12 of this guide for more information on this topic.)

If people are not interested at first, provide them with incentives. For example, local parades are a means for election officials or public candidates to campaign, and for local businesses to get free advertising by sponsoring or donating resources to the mock election.

Be sure that volunteers understand their responsibilities as well as the purposes of the mock election. If you are registering voters, double-check registration deadlines and requirements for registering so that your new voters are eligible for the upcoming elections.

G. PUBLICIZE YOUR EVENT.

The more places you publicize your event, the more people will become involved and the greater your chances will be for hosting a fun and successful event. Word of mouth can be your greatest advocate in getting the word out. Encourage your students and their parents to mention the event to their friends, families, and acquaintances at civic meetings, informal gatherings or impromptu meetings. Also try:

- ★ circulating announcements to local TV/radio stations and newspapers.
- ★ having students distribute flyers they have designed.
- ★ placing student-drafted announcements about your event in local publications, member mailings of local organizations, community bulletins boards, and on TV and radio stations.
- ★ running student-created PSAs in local media. (See Chapter 4.)
- ★ organizing a student telephone chain or letter-writing campaign.

Wherever your creativity may lead you, emphasize the nonpartisan and educational values of the mock election.

H. FOLLOW UP.

As always, acknowledge the efforts of those who helped or participated in your event with thank-you letters.

Evaluate your results with students. Did you reach your goals for registering new voters or getting voters to the polls (particularly if you targeted a specific group)? What was most effective/least effective about your efforts? How could you improve your event next time?